

FETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is a pattern of mental and physical defects that can develop in some unborn babies when the mother drinks too much alcohol during pregnancy. A baby born with FAS may be seriously handicapped and require a lifetime of special care. Some babies with alcohol-related birth defects, including smaller body size, lower birth weight, and other impairments, do not have all of the classic FAS symptoms. These symptoms are sometimes referred to as Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE). Researchers do not all agree on the precise distinctions between FAS and FAE cases.

▼ Cause of the Problem

Alcohol in a pregnant woman's bloodstream circulates to the fetus by crossing the placenta. There the alcohol interferes with the ability of the fetus to receive sufficient oxygen and nourishment for normal cell development in the brain and other body organs.

▼ Possible FAS Symptoms

- *Growth deficiencies: small body size and weight, slower than normal development and failure to catch up.*
- *Skeletal deformities: deformed ribs and sternum; curved spine; hip dislocations; bent, fused, webbed, or missing fingers or toes; limited movement of joints; small head.*
- *Facial abnormalities: small eye openings; skin webbing between eyes and base of nose; drooping eyelids; nearsightedness; failure of eyes to move in same direction; short upturned nose; sunken nasal bridge; flat or absent groove between nose and upper lip; thin upper lip; opening in roof of mouth; small jaw; low-set or poorly formed ears.*
- *Organ deformities: heart defects; heart murmurs; genital malformations; kidney and urinary defects.*
- *Central nervous system handicaps: small brain; faulty arrangement of brain cells and connective tissue; mental retardation – usually mild to moderate but occasionally severe; learning disabilities; short attention span; irritability in infancy; hyperactivity in childhood; poor body, hand, and finger coordination.*

▼ Size of the Problem

The incidence (number of new cases each year) of FAS and FAE are significantly under-reported. Therefore, projections are usually based on estimates of their occurrence per 1,000 live births. Recent studies by researchers Ernest Abel and Robert Sokol suggest that the incidence of FAS can conservatively be estimated at 0.33 cases per 1,000 live births. Missouri recorded 75,242 live births in 1998 and 75,366 in 1999, which would yield at least 25 new cases of FAS per year. The incidence of FAE is generally regarded to be several times the magnitude of FAS cases, perhaps in the hundreds in Missouri.

▼ Recommendations

Any amount of drinking during pregnancy is believed to have adverse effects on fetal development. Frequent drinking and binge drinking (five or more drinks per occasion) pose greater dangers to the developing fetus. The fetus is more vulnerable to various types of injury depending on the stage of development in which alcohol is encountered.

A safe amount of drinking during pregnancy has not been determined.

▼ Further Reading

For additional information on this subject visit the websites of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (www.niaaa.nih.gov) and the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (www.health.org).



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Sources: National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Addiction, Missouri Department of Health, State Center for Health Statistics, Food and Drug Administration, National Council on Alcoholism, United States Surgeon General, and United States Department of Health and Human Services